

WORK SESSION OF THE GREENBELT CITY COUNCIL held Wednesday, June 18, 2014, to discuss Playground Surfacing.

Mayor Jordan started the meeting at 8:10 p.m. It was held in the Council Room of the Municipal Building.

PRESENT WERE: Councilmembers Judith F. Davis, Konrad E. Herling, Leta M. Mach, Silke I. Pope, Edward V.J. Putens, Rodney M. Roberts and Mayor Emmett V. Jordan.

STAFF PRESENT WERE: Michael P. McLaughlin, City Manager; David E. Moran, Assistant City Manager; and Cindy Murray, City Clerk.

OTHERS PRESENT WERE: Lola Skolnik, Park and Recreation Advisory Board; Laura Kressler, Public Safety Advisory Committee; Derek Thompson, Susan Stewart, and others.

Mayor Jordan explained that during construction of a new playground between 2 Laurel Hill and 53 Ridge last year, several residents expressed concerns about the safety of rubber nugget playground surfacing. Staff then further researched the use of engineered wood fiber (EWF), rubber nugget and poured-in-place as playground surfacing materials. After review of the information and discussions at several Council meetings including public input/debate, Council decided to switch to poured in place surfacing at this playground. However, Council referred the issue of playground surfacing options for future playgrounds to the Park and Recreation Advisory Board, Public Safety Advisory Committee and Youth Advisory Committee for their review on July 8, 2013.

Lola Skolnik, Chair of the Park and Recreation Advisory Board (PRAB), said PRAB considered the referral at their November 20, 2013, and January 15, 2014, meetings. She explained that guest speakers were invited to make presentations in order to educate PRAB members on the topic of playground surfacing options. Ms. Skolnik added that the Public Safety Advisory Committee, Youth Advisory Committee and Advisory Committee on Environmental Sustainability were invited to attend.

Ms. Skolnik said PRAB issued Report #2014-1 dated February 19, 2014, on the referral. She noted the report indicates that the most important aspect of playground surfacing is its ability to protect children from injury, specifically under and around the playground apparatus. Further, it states that there is no one surface type that can be recommended for all playgrounds; the surfacing must meet the specific needs of the site and the playground users. Ms. Skolnik then reviewed the recommendations contained in the report:

- 1. Plan for a variety and balance of playground surfaces that meet ADA standards among the City playgrounds.*
- 2. Inform the public/consumers of their playground choices within the City by posting a list on the City's website including a map of all playground locations, surface type and type of apparatus. A brochure should be created with this information as well.*
- 3. Plan to remove and replace all loose rubber nugget playground surfaces on City playgrounds with surfaces that meet ADA standards.*
- 4. Continue to assess each playground site for the best "fit" surfacing material.*
- 5. Inspect the Material Safety Data Sheets carefully to avoid known harmful chemicals in the surfacing materials and avoid petrochemicals wherever possible.*
- 6. Be sure playground surfacing is installed correctly by reputable companies.*
- 7. If rubber surfaces (such as poured-in-place) are installed, select light colored material to reduce heat absorption.*
- 8. Increase raking and filling maintenance to engineered wood fiber surfaces so that proper safety depths are maintained and foreign materials are removed.*

9. *City staff responsible for playgrounds should keep abreast of the latest research and revisit the playground surface issue as new information becomes available.*

Ms. Davis said she supported PRAB's recommendations except for #3, which could be a financial issue for the City if removal and replacement of all loose rubber nugget playgrounds were done all at one time. She said she would support removal and replacement of the loose rubber nugget surface when the playgrounds were scheduled for replacement. Ms. Skolnik said PRAB did not intend for it to be done all at one time, just when up for replacement.

Mr. Roberts said he had originally supported poured in place surface but, after learning that it contained toxic materials, was now totally opposed to this surface. He further recommended that all rubber mulch nuggets should be removed from playgrounds immediately since it does not meet Americans with Disability Act (ADA) requirements.

Ms. Pope said she opposed rubber nugget surface but thinks poured in place is a good and safe playground surface. Regarding EWF playgrounds, she noted the need to guarantee the maintenance will be to the highest standard.

Mr. Putens also noted his opposition to rubber nugget surface which produces a bad odor, especially on hot days and said rubber nugget surface playgrounds that are in direct sunlight should be replaced as soon as possible. Mr. Putens indicated his preference for poured in place surface. He also advised that maintenance and inspection checks on all City owned and/or maintained playground should be done on a regular basis and appropriate records kept on these checks.

Ms. Kressler explained the Public Safety Advisory Board (PSAC) review of the referral. She summarized PSAC Report #2014-2 dated March 4, 2014, which indicates its preference for EWF as a first choice for playground surfacing and poured in place as a second choice. Ms. Kresler said PSAC did have concerns with potential heat injuries and chemical outgassing from the poured in place surfacing. PSAC does not recommend the use of rubber nugget surfacing

There was discussion regarding the Youth Advisory Committee (YAC) Report on the referral. YAC recommends that City use EWF for playground surfacing.

Ms. Mach agreed that rubber nugget mulch should be removed but noted the cost for removal and replacement with another material was not only a cost to the City, but to some local homeowner associations who own the playgrounds and contract with the City for maintenance responsibilities. Mr. Putens said the cost burden for replacement of the playground surface material should not be put onto the local homeowner associations.

Ms. Skolnik said that Windsor Green has a disproportionate number of playgrounds with rubber nugget surfacing and for fairness, the City should start in this area with its replacement of playground surface. She added that some edging materials on playgrounds are a safety (trip hazard) issue.

Derek Thompson, Windsor Green, said there are five heavily used playgrounds in Windsor Green (with City maintenance responsibility) which all have rubber nugget surfacing. He advised the Windsor Green Board had never received any complaints from their community members about the playground surfacing. Mr. Thompson said he was sure the City will make a balanced decision regarding future playground surfacing.

Ms. Davis suggested that Windsor Green hold its own community meeting on the issue of playground surfacing to determine what surfacing option its community prefers for the five playgrounds. She further suggested a City staff person and member(s) of PRAB, PSAC and YAC be invited to participate.

Ms. Pope said she had seen a mix of surfacing materials used in playgrounds in other areas, such as poured in place under slides then EWF in other areas of the playground. She suggested this may be an option to be considered in the future. Ms. Skolnik suggested checking with Maryland National Capital Park and Planning Commission (M-NCPPC) and other agencies that have mixed surface to determine maintenance issues. Mr. Roberts said EWF is a superior surfacing option and it doesn't make sense to use a mix of EWF and poured in place surface.

There was discussion regarding the EWF surfaces freezing in cold temperatures. Mr. Moran said proper playground drainage would eliminate some moisture that accumulates in EWF surfaces but in some conditions, such as snow and ice storms, this could be a problem. Mr. Herling suggested signage be considered warning about freezing of the surface in cold temperatures. Ms. Skolnik said some jurisdictions close their playgrounds when temperatures are very cold.

Ms. Mach questioned why rubber nugget surfacing was no longer ADA complaint. Mr. Moran said the report of non-compliance was from information obtained from Ms. McManus, M-NCPPC, based on M-NCPPC methods to determine ADA compliance. Mr. Moran said the Consumer Product Safety Commission (CPSC) and the material manufacturers still maintain the product is ADA complaint when installed to their standards and maintained properly.

Ms. Davis mentioned the Council Action Request for an updated inventory of playgrounds, which should include any safety and maintenance issues, such as equipment damage and trip hazards. She noted Council needs this information to determine how to proceed with future playground renovations.

Susan Stewart, 2-P Plateau Place, noted her opposition to rubber nugget and poured in place playground surfacing. She said she had tested the surface temperatures of playgrounds yesterday and found that EWF surfaces are the coolest and poured in place was the hottest. She reported that tests done today indicated that an EWF surface was 119 degrees, an asphalt surface was 127 degrees, grass was 86 degrees and the center of poured in place surface was 156 degrees. Mayor Jordan requested City staff check on playground surface temperatures also.

After further discussion, Council noted their support to proceed with the recommendations proposed by PRAB. They requested staff: 1) update the playground inventory; 2) determine cost for replacement of rubber nugget playgrounds; and 3) present a reasonable approach, such as a multi-year plan, for replacement of these surfaces. Mr. Roberts requested staff consider his playground design which eliminates playground borders.

Ms. Kressler said it would be helpful to have a cost estimate for the maintenance needs of engineered wood fiber playgrounds also.

Mayor Jordan and Council thanked PRAB, PSAC and YAC for their work.

Items of information

Ms. Davis reported that she had attended the Anacostia Trails Heritage Area Governing Board meeting last evening. She said the City is in the running for a grant from ATHA for the Greenbelt Museum and the reprinting of the Bike Trails Maps.

Mr. Herling reported on the Metropolitan Washington Council of Governments Transportation Planning Board meeting.

The meeting ended at 10:24 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

*Cindy Murray
City Clerk*